

U.S. House of Representatives
109th Congress

Opening Statement

Representative Elijah E. Cummings, D-Maryland

“Telecommuting: A 21st Century Solution to Traffic Jams and Terrorism”

Subcommittee on Federal Workforce and Agency Organization
Committee on Government Reform

July 18, 2006

Mr. Chairman,

Thank you for holding this important hearing to examine the benefits of telecommuting for federal employees.

Our federal workforce serves the vital function of running the government every day and it is perhaps more vulnerable than we are willing to admit.

We need only look to the recent example at the Internal Revenue Service’s Constitution Avenue office building, where extreme storms last month caused tens of millions of dollars worth of damage, displacing about 2,400 IRS employees.

Among the displaced workers were several top officials, including Commissioner Mark W. Everson, and many tax attorneys, law enforcement agents, and administrative staff.

Those IRS employees whose work was deemed “vital” returned to work in mid-July—almost a month after the June 25 storm. More than 800 of them will work out of leased offices at Crystal Plaza in Arlington until repairs at the flooded building are complete. The rest will either report to an IRS satellite office, or telecommute.

The telecommuters will save the IRS both time and money involved with renting additional office space and moving around employees at satellite offices to make more space.

From a good government perspective, telecommuting is an ideal solution to the problem the IRS is facing. But some obstacles exist.

Most IRS employees cannot access their IRS e-mail accounts from home, and confidentiality rules prevent them from accessing certain information on non-government computers.

We understand from the recent security breach at the Department of Veterans Affairs that there is a compelling reason to enforce security measures; however, I understand that there are strategies that could be implemented to protect sensitive information while allowing government employees to work from home at the same time. I look forward to hearing more about these options from today's witnesses.

At the IRS, for example, many employees working from home were issued IRS computers that contain taxpayers' personal information in encrypted form.

The example of the IRS's recent disaster brings to light the possibility that other vital government functions could also be shutdown—by something as devastating as a terrorist attack, or even as commonplace as a storm.

We must do all in our power to ensure that the government will function effectively and efficiently under even the most trying of circumstances.

For that reason, as a cosponsor of Ranking Member Danny Davis's proposed "Continuity of Operations Demonstration Project Act" (H.R. 5366), and I am interested to hear from today's witnesses more about how this bill will improve the way we do business.

I look forward to the testimonies of today's witnesses and yield back the balance of my time.